

7

A New Life (1951–1953)

My education at Sherry School had lasted only that one term of the spring of 1950 because the school board had already made plans to close all the one-room schools and consolidate the students in the district into one elementary school (Grades 1–8, still no kindergarten). This new school was built just south of town on Route 111 and was initially named the Defiance Township School. Later, it was renamed the Anthony Wayne School after the local hero General Anthony Wayne, also known as Mad Anthony. The school is still active today, and my brother Art's grandson attended it at one time, but it has been expanded considerably from the little school it was when I completed the seventh and eighth grades there.

After Sherry School, this new school was luxurious. It had honest-to-God toilets, a cafeteria (no more tin lunch boxes arrayed on the wooden shelves at the back of the schoolroom), central heating, a

gym with real baskets and backboards for basketball, and softball fields (baseball was banned at the new school). Now, instead of four grades in one room, we had two grades to a room, and my teacher was once again Mrs. Custer, who also acted as principal for the school. By this time, I was on my feet academically, even in math, and thrived. My parents basked in my successes and took every opportunity to attend school functions, including PTA meetings and the like, and I attended along with them to interpret. For them, everything I ever achieved was a vindication of them.



At the June 1952 eighth-grade graduation at Defiance Township School, my parents are in their Sunday best, and all four of us boys are scrubbed, necktied, and suited like the little young men we are supposed to be in America during the '50s. We are as poor as any family can be, but Mom is determined to keep us looking decent. Our little class of twenty pupils is first treated to corsages and carnations, then a sitdown dinner, and finally the ceremonies. Mom is in her element, socializing with one and all while I interpret, and Dad stands shyly by, saying nothing. I marvel at her ease, her ability to mingle with the Hearing world without a by-your-leave. She is enjoying the spotlight as the proud mother of an overachieving son and plays her role to the hilt, almost too much so to my embarrassment and, I think also, to Dad's.

After each conversation ends, the Hearing person always says, without exception, "Bob, you have such fine parents! They have done so much with what they have been given!" And then I interpret to Mom and Dad, and they smile and thank them profusely.

I think to myself, what a crock of shit! But deep down, under all the platitudes, I know they are right.

As a thirteen-year-old, I didn't have much appreciation for my parents, didn't really understand how hard their lives had been. Generally, I considered them to be fundamentally "normal" people who happened not to be able to hear. And then, when things didn't go my way, or when I saw them in a Hearing context, I perceived how different we were from each other. But as soon as I had those feelings, I was awash in guilt for what I had done; I had abandoned my parents. Most days, however, I did not think of them as "Deaf," with all the cultural implications that word has come to hold for me. My view could be stated as "Well, sure, there are some things you can't do, but other than that, you're like all my friends' parents." My parents said almost nothing about their Deafness, other than from time to time to belabor us kids with the truth that we were lucky to be able to hear or, more frequently, to talk about how lucky we were not to have gone to the Deaf school. At other times, they would use their school as a model of good education and a place in which to learn correct behavior and proper respect. We were admonished, "We were never allowed to do that at the Deaf school." It really wasn't until years later when I began reading the literature pertaining to Deafness that I had even the beginning of an understanding of who my parents were culturally and what kind of world they came from.

No matter how I viewed their Deafness, however, one aspect of our family life was clear and consistent: Money was very scarce. True, living on a subsistence family farm gave us many benefits such as ample food, free housing, and a certain security, but times were changing the general farming community. Dad and Grandpa Lloyd were running the farm on a fifty-fifty basis. For Grandpa and Grandma, their share of the small profits from the farm, when added to their Social Security benefits, provided them with a comfortable income. At the time, I never questioned this financial arrangement because it was

traditional and seemed businesslike and fair, but as I look back on it as a parent who has given unstintingly to his own kids to see them through bad times, I am disturbed by how unfair it was to put business before family.

I am sure many folks in and around Defiance talked about what fine people the Newtons were to take in Richard and Elizabeth Miller, especially with Richard not even being Mr. Newton's son, and give them a job and a place to live. My grandparents were living in relative security with substantial savings in the bank while we were scraping by. My grandparents' view was that my parents were profligate, keeping up their city ways, buying all that store-bought stuff, driving miles and miles every week to visit their Deaf friends, squandering their money on gas and car expenses as well as entertainment. In fact, the money was simply not enough, and it did not compare to the incomes being enjoyed by many of their Deaf friends who had stuck it out in the city and weathered the postwar recession.



I had made a little money while I'd been staying at my grandparents' during those previous summers by raising broilers, or chickens for the table. At that time, Grandma Amy had thought it would be a good idea for me to open a savings account, and by now, I have a respectable amount in it, which becomes a thorn in my flesh and, in the end, comes near to destroying the bond between me and Mom and Dad.

Any money that goes into that account comes from me and not my grandparents, but the rule is that, once the money is in the bank, it stays there. My parents have never asked me to draw money out to help them, and in any case, I am powerless because my grandparents set the account up so two signatures are required to make withdrawals, Grandma's and

mine. Eventually, a time comes when Mom and Dad are desperately in need of a \$90 loan, a substantial amount of money in the '50s.

I go to my grandparents' side of the house. Grandma is in her kitchen, rolling out dough to make the noodles that are her signal culinary achievement in the neighborhood. Instead of slicing them in great strips, she rolls the dough out until it is paper thin, rolls the flattened disk into a tight cylinder, and then slices the noodles into hairlike thin strands. She explained to me once that she began making them that way because my grandfather Miller, who had a stomach ailment, could digest them more easily. They rise in a heap of buttery splendor on the white floured rolling surface.

I begin, "Grandma, Mom and Dad are in a real pinch and they need to borrow \$90 from me. Do you think I could let them have some money from my savings account?"

A long silence follows, which signals Grandma's deep disapproval. She begins, "Well, I expect so, but I'll have to talk it over with your grandpa." She walks into the front parlor where Grandpa is glued to the console radio that stands next to his old armchair. I can hear him grumbling his disapproval, although I can't make out the words.

She returns to the kitchen and announces, "Yes, I expect you can, but we think you ought to have them sign a note for the money. You need to protect yourself, or you might not get your money back."

I reply, "But what would be the point? I'd never be able to get my money back just because I have a note. I couldn't call it in and I couldn't sell it, so what's the point? And it'll just embarrass Mom and Dad."

She replies calmly, "Don't make any difference. You got to have a note. You can't loan money to people without a note; that's what you got to understand. Your grandpa and I don't feel we can go along with this if you don't have a note."

I know this request will be deeply humiliating to my parents, who are very proud people despite suffering the slights and outright abuse

that Deaf people are subject to and, now, find themselves beholden to this smug little son of theirs.

I return to our side of the house. I explain things to my parents. As I expect, they are embarrassed, but they have no options. Mercifully, Dad draws up the note, it is signed, the money is lent and eventually repaid, and my relationship to my parents is deeply damaged.



My parents were proud of their ability to make it on their own, and they tried always to take care of their own business. For example, they requested my interpreting help only sparingly. Contrary to what seems to have been the case with many CODAs, my parents did not ask me to accompany them to doctor's appointments and the like. They set definite limits on what they thought I could and could not do, and they protected their privacy. Even now that my parents are both in their eighties, they are reluctant when my brother Art and my sister-in-law Dixie who live next door to them regularly help out with matters that require interpreting. Designing a world in which they could function independently was a serious priority for them.

Although my parents had moved sixty miles from Toledo, they managed not only to maintain their friendships with their group in Toledo but also to link up with Deaf friends all around northwestern Ohio and beyond. Deaf people tend to concentrate in urban areas where opportunities for employment are better and where a strong Deaf community already exists. To my knowledge, my parents were the only Deaf couple living in Defiance County. Keeping up their contacts with their circle of friends required regular visiting that involved a constant round of travel to and from the houses and

towns as well as interminable amounts of driving. The expense was considerable, in gasoline, cars, and car repairs, and Mom's junketing, as it appeared to others, was a source of friction between my parents and my grandparents.

Grandma Amy complained constantly, and Grandpa Lloyd was always nonplussed if Dad had to go somewhere because Grandpa's notion of farming involved a seven-day-a-week, twenty-four-hour-a-day commitment to the land, the cattle, the hogs, the chickens, the sheep, the garden, and whatever. But then, if Grandpa needed any social contact, all he had to do was visit the neighbor down the road or, perhaps, make a few phone calls, although he never used the phone, letting Grandma make all the calls. He and Grandma were in constant contact with friends; people were dropping in to visit them almost daily. And, in the tradition of country hospitality that assumed that one's door was always open to company, they were always stopping to visit friends.

At first, I tended to take my grandparents' part on these issues. After all, they had control of the forum, which they expressed in my language, and I heard their side almost daily. Besides, I could see how the cost of this socializing cut into our already small income. Today, from a vantage point of years and maturity, I understand that my parents absolutely needed this activity in their lives and that my grandparents were blind to their needs. My parents were aliens in an alien culture, isolated for weeks at a time from social contact with the Deaf community. They were desperate to talk with friends of their own, much in the same way that immigrants seek out their own culture and depend on it for support, banding together in tightly knit communities.

Whenever this conflict over my parents' need to link up with their Deaf friends broke out, I was its push-pull victim. My attitude

was pretty much controlled by self-interest. If the family we were visiting had kids to play with, I was ready to go. I liked visiting Deaf people. They were not dour, they did not work incessantly, they did not live frugal, stinted lives, and their kids thought and acted just like me. They joked, they laughed, and they teased. In a word, they had fun, and they were very much my people. As a CODA, I had standing in the Deaf community. I wasn't Deaf, but I was the next best thing, a CODA. This status has always stood me in good stead whenever I have been in a situation where a Deaf person needed my help, usually with interpreting. Once at my university, I came up on a maintenance crew, and the boss was trying to explain something to an electrician who was Deaf. I asked whether I could help, and then I interpreted. The electrician asked me how I knew ASL, and I signed the familiar phrase, *Mother-Father Deaf*, and he beamed knowingly at me. I was accepted. Much as I was immersed in Hearing culture, my home was also with my parents and the Deaf community.

Even though Dad was much more of a loner and didn't really crave the social life as much as Mom did, Mom insisted on it, especially after she went to work because work empowered her and diminished my dad's control over family decisions. She was determined to have life on her terms, finally, and she did.

Four years as the poor relation of the family finally forced Mom and Dad to come to a decision. For months, the debate had gone back and forth between them. Mom was determined to go back to work. Dad was adamantly opposed. The battles raged, and the four kids watched in awe as these two stubborn, emotional partners duked it out in ASL. In the end, Mom got her way as Dad became convinced by the simple arithmetic of our situation. In no way could we survive as a family on the farm income. Mom would go to work. Eventually, she got a job as a shirt presser in *Defiance* at the *DeLuxe*

Cleaners. At first, Dad continued the farming, and we kids took on various household chores in addition to our farm chores to make the situation work.

Mom's decision never went down well with Grandma Amy, who was of the old school, but I can't imagine how she could have proposed an alternative, given the financial bind we were in. Our farms (the main farm in Defiance County and the smaller farm in Paulding County) totaled about 140 acres, and we were milking about fourteen cows. Anyone with a sense of the economics of farming can judge that, even in the 1950s, that agricultural base could barely have supported one family, let alone two.

With milk prices spiraling downward, Dad finally had to find other work to supplement his farm income, which caused a great strain between my grandparents and us. For a long time, Grandpa Lloyd, who suffered from severe lameness in his knees, had not been able to do any work, and then, he had two serious strokes that, for a time, rendered him almost immobile. By 1953, Dad was working full-time at Johns-Manville Corporation in Defiance and farming full-time. I was being asked to bear more of the work, and the strain was beginning to show on all of us.

The farming life depended on the family's careful hoarding of resources, its making do with the goods the farm produced, and its saving cash to purchase more land. My grandparents looked backward while my parents looked ahead to the consumerist life being promoted by a burgeoning postwar economy that was bent on providing all the goods and services we had done without during the war. My parents—even my father, who was born on a farm—had not been brought up on the farm and were unacquainted with its demands. Mom and Dad had experienced strenuous upbringings but within an institutional context, at the School for the Deaf, where most of

the children came from larger towns and cities and to which most of them were destined to return.

My grandfather, who was the key to upcoming changes, had no real interest in developing and adding to the farm. He had already deeded more than half of it to his wife to settle pressing debts. He had no family of his own to whom he could pass on his share. He was a childless widower, remarried late in life. Basically, the farm and Social Security provided him with an income sufficient to allow him to continue his somewhat manorial life of the past, dealing with hired men and spending most of his time hunting and fishing, which he loved passionately.



Late summer, sometime in 1952 or 1953, and the weather is hot. Grandma is canning tomatoes in her kitchen, with both the back and side doors open. A dilapidated truck pulls into the drive, carrying what appears to be a family of Mexicans or Indians on board. The driver gets out, comes to the side door, and knocks.

Grandma answers. He asks, "Excuse, we paint your roof? Aluminum paint, very cheap. We see your barn roof needs paint?" I can tell from their accent and the Oklahoma plates on the truck that they are Indians.

She replies, "Well, I'll have to get my husband to talk to you." She goes in, summons Grandpa, and brings out a large pitcher of water and a plate of molasses cookies for the woman, a teenage boy who is his dad's helper, and three children, all who are jammed into the hot cab of the truck.

Grandpa comes out onto the side stoop. "What can I do for you?"

"We seen your barn roof needs paint. We do aluminum, waterproof, last forever, very cheap. Twenty-five dollars."

He hesitates, "I don't know, that's too much for us. It's only a shed and it ain't much of a job. Do it myself for five bucks." The man looks

down at Grandpa's crutches but says nothing. What Grandpa means is, I, not he, can do it, and not for five bucks but for nothing.

"We do very good job, better than brush, spray on, twenty dollars."

Grandpa waits a few minutes. "Well, I'll tell you what. I'll give you ten bucks to do it and that's my price."

I can see the look of desperation in the man's eyes. He answers, "Sir, we cannot do for ten dollars, cost that much for paint. We need gas to get to next town and have to find a job quick."

"Well, tell you what I'll do. I'll give you ten bucks and five gallons of gas, how about it?" We have a large store of gas on hand to run the farm machinery. Five gallons is worth about a dollar.

The man's look is impassive but I can sense a deep well of resentment and desperation. "Okay, sir, deal. We do it for the gas. Paint cost ten dollars."

They drive their truck out to the shed where the gasoline tank is also kept. I help them put some of the gas in the truck and some in a canister, and then they set to work.

Grandpa can't see very well, so when he looks out it appears to him that the roof is being transformed into a gleaming wonder. To me it seems a little washed out, but I say nothing. I notice a strong smell of gasoline in the air. The man and boy soon finish, collect their money, and are on their way.

Grandpa remarks, "Guess I showed them damn Messkins."

I correct him, "They weren't Mexicans, they were Indian."

He shoots back, "It's all the same"—an anthropological judgment truer than he or I realize at the time.

Two days later, it rains. Grandma and I look out at the shed from Grandma's kitchen window. The gleaming paint has begun to fade, and patches of the old rusty roof are showing through. Rivulets of aluminum liquid run down the corrugated roofing.

Grandma smiles, then says, "Oh, my!"

After the war, with the increase in agricultural mechanization, the patchwork farms soon got swallowed up by large conglomerates of farms, usually worked by one farmer on share with several landowners. With a little imagination, one can bring to life those countless thousands of mini-dramas played out by farm husbands and wives, looking over the accounts late at night at kitchen tables and tearfully deciding to pack it in. This upheaval is precisely what happened to our farm. When Dad and Grandpa Lloyd gave up farming, their enterprise was taken over by a local high-production farmer.

My grandmother, the real owner of the larger share of the farm, was so steeped in tradition and possessed of a Depression mentality that she lived to hang on to what she had. But my parents had to look to the future. They had four boys to support, and so they did what many farm families did. They found jobs in the service industry in town or in the factories. Farmers joined the assembly line, and their wives became waitresses, checkout clerks, housemaids, or shirt pressers. My parents despised the life of denial. They were the products of a new age, of television and mass advertising, and they sought the vocations that, within their limits as Deaf people, would provide the “new life” of televisions, dishwashers, dryers, store-bought clothes, and dinners out.

The tragedy of our loss of the bucolic life was not merely a tragedy of the Deaf family unable to cope with the farm; it was a tragedy of the American landscape and was, in fact, happening all around us. The farm family, surviving on the produce of the land, relying on the labor of the members of the household, possessing skills in a variety of farming enterprises such as dairying and hog or chicken raising, has now passed from the American scene and is memorialized throughout the Midwest in the ever dwindling number of all-purpose red barns and outbuildings that still survive and in the creations of writers and artists.



One afternoon in late winter 1953, Grandma Amy calls out to me as I am making my way to the house from finishing chores, “Bobby, will you tell your Dad to come on over. Grandpa’s got something he needs to talk over with him.”

Dad is following not far behind me, so I turn to him and tell him something is up.

We enter the little back kitchen where a nice fire in the coal stove gives the room comfortable warmth. Grandpa is sitting at the kitchen table and turns to me. He kind of mumbles, “Bob, tell your dad I’ve decided to sell out. We just can’t manage anymore with things this way. The cows don’t get the attention they need. Your dad’s got more work than any of us can do. It’s time to call it quits.”

I turn to Dad and tell him what Grandpa has said. He doesn’t react at all.

Grandpa continues, “Tell him we’re keeping the farm, but I’ve called Yoder and Frey [the auctioneers], and we’ll sell off all the machinery and stock, and your dad’ll get fifty percent of everything we’ve bought since he came on back in ’50. The same applies to the livestock. Any cows and calves that came on since ’50 he’ll get half, less his half of the auctioneer’s commission. I’m gonna rent the farm out to John Webb. You folks can stay on in the house, and we’ll work out some kind of rent. Ask him if that settlement suits him.”

I explain to Dad. He simply nods, and the years of servitude come to an end. For my grandfather, it is the end of a dynasty, the end of a farming tradition that stretched back to 1863 when the Newtons first acquired the farm.

We walk out the door and around the corner to our side of the house, and Dad delivers the news to Mom, who begins immediately to plan what she will do with the money.

In 1953, the sale took place, and my parents came into a fair chunk of money, which got spent almost immediately to cover bills. Even in the best of times, my parents never were able to stick to any kind of savings plan. What came in went out. In hard times, we skimped; in good times, we splurged. It was a pattern of bingeing and starving that I have found difficult to break in my own life. My parents considered the act of saving a luxury, something you did only after you'd bought all the things you needed and had paid all your bills. What they seemed not to realize was that you never run out of needs and, most likely, will always carry some debt, no matter how much money you make.

Over the course of my adult years, I have spent more than my share of genuine angst trying to reconcile my conflicted feelings about my grandparents. Taken separately, they had their individual reasons for their share of guilt in the way they treated my parents. My grandfather had no parental feelings for my father whatever. He never treated him as a son, even a stepson. His sole interest in him was as a worker on the farm, someone he tolerated but whom, deep down, he regarded as inferior, even though my dad proved day after day that he was a bright, insightful, innovative, and clever farmer. I have often commented to my students that I believe, in his own sphere, my father was a more learned person than I with my PhD because the farm made so many demands on his thinking processes and because he had to be versed in so much lore that he needed to deal with all the problems he had to face. My grandfather had almost no respect for my father's skills and less of an inclination to place any faith in his abilities. As this disparagement became clearer to me, a rift developed between the two of us, and eventually, from about the age of fifteen on, I was barely on speaking terms with my grandfather. I think he chalked it up to teenage rebelliousness, but it went

deeper than that. I hated him for what I believed he'd done to my dad and to our family. In my late age, I hold a more charitable view of him, particularly because I know he cared for me and did so much for me.

My grandmother's situation was more complex because this man, my dad, was her son. In her character, I could detect the source of my dad's shyness and his reticence, and being his son, I could also trace the source of my own. She was a well-meaning, careful, repressed woman who was steeped in misunderstanding and prejudice about Deaf people, and the fact that she had a son with whom she was barely able to communicate didn't help her overcome that prejudice. Nevertheless, in all fairness, I have to admit that my parents could be difficult and often did exhibit poor judgment. Yet, in spite of every indication my parents gave of being mature adults, Grandma Amy never could quite treat them as grown-ups. Her admiration always seemed reserved for her older Hearing son, my uncle Lester whom she loved and admired, and for his family, whom she saw as respectable, judicious, and self-reliant, whereas she maintained for us only a judgment that we were the trashy, irresponsible poor relation who always had to survive on the charity of relatives. Ironically, years later when she began to show signs of senility, her younger son (my dad) and his wife were the ones who offered to make arrangements in their lives to care for her, but they were rebuffed by Hearing relatives who felt my parents were not up to the task, and consequently, she languished in nursing homes for seven years before she died, plenty of time in which to consider the irony as best she could.